

SEARCHING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN YANN MARTEL'S *LIFE OF PI*

PENCARIAN IDENTITAS KULTURAL DI DALAM NOVEL *LIFE OF PI* KARYA YANN MARTEL

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ABSTRAK

Life of Pi adalah novel yang ditulis oleh Yann Martel. Novel ini menceritakan tentang seorang anak muda bernama Piscine Patel yang hidup di ruang antara. Dia tidak bisa memilih apakah dia orang Timur atau Barat, Kanada atau India. Penelitian ini berfokus pada identitas kultural, suatu hal yang tidak dimiliki langsung sejak lahir. Identitas kultural selalu berproses. Penelitian ini disusun dengan menggunakan cara deskriptif dan penelitian kualitatif untuk mengartikan dan menganalisa yang berhubungan dengan isu postkolonial terutama dalam hal identitas. Sumber utama pengambilan data adalah informasi sumber data dan fakta tentang isu postkolonial melalui perwujudan watak dan peristiwa yang terpilih didalam *Life of Pi* yang berhubungan dengan identitas dan sumber lain seperti jurnal, thesis, internet, dan buku untuk membantu pengumpulan data. Tujuan dari penelitian ini antara lain untuk mengartikan konsep dari negara berbangsa di saat tidak adanya identitas yang pasti dan untuk mendapatkan pengertian bahwa tidak ada lagi yang lebih hebat antara Timur dan Barat semenjak Kanada sebagai tanah yang menjanjikan terpatahkan.

Kata kunci: postkolonial Homi Bhabha, identitas budaya, Yann Martel.

ABSTRACT

Life of Pi is a novel written by Yann Martel. This novel tells a story of a young indian boy named Piscine Patel who lives "in-between". He does not choose whether he is east or west, Canada or India. This research is focused on cultural identity which is not something already exist. It is always on going process. This research is conducted by using qualitative research and descriptive way to interpret and analyze the data that relates with postcolonial issue especially in identity. The main source of the data is the fact and information about postcolonial issue through selected event and characterization in the *Life of Pi* which related on identity and other sources such as jurnal, thesis, internet, and the book to help collecting the data. The goals of this research are; to interpret the concepts of nation-state since there is no fixed identity and to get understanding that there is no more superior between West and East since Canada as the promising land is rejected.

Keywords : Postcolonial Homi Bhabha, cultural identity, Yann Martel.

1. Introduction

Life of Pi is Yann Martel's novel. It narrates the story of Pi, a young Indian boy who lives to tell his dramatic escape from death after a shipwreck. Pi with his family goes to Canada to get a better life because they think that Canada is "a promising land". But, their ship suddenly sinks with "a monstrous metallic burp". Pi finds himself stranded on a lifeboat in Pacific ocean.

Therefore, *Life of Pi* is about the one who lives "in-between". He does not choose whether he is East or West, Canada or India. So, his cultural identity is also blurred.

In the novel, Martel uses his main character who reflects the way in which national identity has moved beyond fixed and dichotomous forms of identity into a process of identification that refuses fixity. Martel tries to

see identity as process that transcends the boundaries of transcription to nation. In his mind, there is no fixed identity. Identity is just such a voyage that is undertaken by Piscine Patel and his family. When they leave their native India and set sail for the metaphorical "the promising land", they finally fail. It means there is no certainty for someone to get his cultural identity. When Pi wants to change his new cultural background, he never achieves Canada. Thus, this article tries to focus on how cultural identity is constructed in *Life of Pi*.

The incomplete identity is shown by Martel through the characterization of Pi. The main character, Pi, engages with the cultural practices of the Hindu, Christian and Islamic religions that prove there is no absolute truth in every religion. The truth about one's identity involved his religion even nationality is always in process. Therefore, this research use the word "searching" because of the comprehension that there is no fixed cultural identity. The meaning of searching is not acceptable as to search an identified thing, but to search processing thing. The position of cultural identity based on the novel, however metaphorically is portrayed like Pi oscillated in the sea. It is possible for him to drift in every place, not only in Canada or India. Pi's task on Martel's novel is just to search his processing cultural identity.

This research applies Bhabha's cultural theory associated to individual or collective identity and its concept of nationality. This study is designed to achieve some goals, there are : to know how Yann martel's novel subvert traditional notions of a fixed cultural identity, to interpret the concepts of nation-state since there is no fixed identity, and to get understanding that there is no more superior between West and East since Canada as the central or the promising land is rejected.

2. Method of Research

Since this study tries to focus on the searching identity in *Life of Pi* novel, this research uses a qualitative research method and library research which the data come from the books or article. Library research uses documentary technique to collect the data (Blaxter, 2006:141). The primary data in this study is taken from Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. To see India and Canada's cultural and historical background, this research uses secondary data

coming from Mackey's *Postcolonialism, Pedagogy and Canadian Literature* and Asman's *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*. These books are also beneficial to understand the effect of multiple cultural and historical backgrounds toward one's identity.

This research uses Bhabha's theory in his masterpiece *The Location of Culture* to determine Pi's cultural identity. There are some steps to process the data. The first step is reading and understanding the novel as well as highlighting the words, sentences, paragraphs, and dialogs that are related to cultural identity as shown by Martel in his novel. The second is classifying the required data based on Bhabha's theory by imputing them together with Martel's characterization of Pi in the novel to observe how cultural identity develops for the subject in the Third World.

In the processing of data, there are three points of analysis applied in this research, for the first this research uses the perspective of Bhabha "a discursive and epistemic relationship that will be non-colonizing and will, therefore, allow for a mutual exploration of difference (1998:108)" to dig the notion of difference that is developed to the growth of cultural identity. Thus, this research is explored how the notion of fixed identity is gradually challenged by portraying character of Pi in the castaway. The last step this research tries to answer that Pi's choice unconsciously gives an implemented space for deconstructing and re-questioning Canada as the promising land and India as the old land since he does not have a chance to stay in both places.

3. Result

Martel in this novel shows that there is no fixed identity because identity is constructed in one's experience. This experience comes from the past. Then it is connected with the present and with the projection of the future. He intends to provoke that cultural identity can be changed but still bound by some aspects and characters. So, the construction of one's identity is a free choice but it is not absolutely free. Cultural identity also gives an influence to the concept of nation-state. If nation-state can not construct one's cultural identity, so nation-state is nothing. Bhabha's perspective rejects the stable identity associated with the national form. He wants to keep this identity an open one.

4. Discussion

In Post-colonial criticism, identity is the main focus of question. Bhabha sees that post-colonial citizen must “estrangle their identities and produce new forms of knowledge, new modes of differentiation, new sites of power” (1994:120). This strategy is based on the comprehension that identity develops during the whole lifetime. It means there is no fixed identity. Identity is constructed in one’s experience. This experience comes from the past. Then it is connected with the present and with the projection of the future. People think about their lives and identities all the time. However, the process of thinking about one’s identity is an evident that there is a change in life. In relation to the concept of culture, identity is regarded as something stable and there an essence of cultural identity. Meanwhile, for Pi, cultural identity is understood as something unstable. Pi’s identity changes throughout long and difficult journey. He faces catastrophic events when he immigrate to Canada as his promising land. It makes him re-evaluate his beliefs and his way of thinking about the world and other people.

The problems with Pi’s identity can be traced on the level of his religious search. He was born as a Hindu so that being a Hindu was a part of Pi’s cultural identity. Even though Piscine considers himself a devoted Hindu, he is open-minded enough to see relations between his own and two other religions practiced in his country- Christianity and Islam. At the age of fourteen, he meets a Christian priest who tells him the story of Jesus from Nazareth. Enchanted by what he hears, he decides to be a Christian while still remaining a Hindu. In the next year, Piscine also meets a Sufi Muslim and asks him to tell the story of Islam. Once again, he is interested to become a believer. These experiences construct his paradigm about static and fixed identity. These multiple experiences oblige people to abandon any static view of identity, and examine the dynamic process of identification. This attitude also destructs the political subjectivity to place one’s identity in single place, “The story of political subjectivity has always been fraught by exclusions of gender, race, class, caste and religion. Civil society has consistently refused admission and participation to those who, in Carole Pateman’s words, lack the attributes and capacities of individuals” (Gandhi, 1998:169).

Arriving in Mexico, he starts a new family and gains new self-schemata, as a husband and a father (Martel, 2002:162). Pi’s religious belief becomes a Christian and a Muslim while never forgetting his Hindu roots. Family and religion, the two aspects of his life which are important for him as a child, stay equally important after his voyage. He is the type of character in what Bhabha calls as hybrid character. He is neither West nor East.

Bhabha considers this negotiation as neither assimilation nor collaboration. It makes possible the emergence of an agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism. Hybrid character does not seek cultural supremacy. Piscine now is a different character from the one who left India seven months earlier. He can no longer call himself a family member or an innocent Hindu believer. He becomes acquainted with the violent side of nature. He becomes tougher. Pi then puts his humanity into question. The changes in his identity are caused by the dramatic situation. His cultural identity is not clear. He is doubled, “The displacement from symbol to sign creates a crisis for any concept of authority based on a system of recognition: colonial specular, doubly inscribed, does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid” (Bhabha, 1994:114).

What Martel creates toward his character, Pi, is “to go beyond such binaries of power in order to re-organize our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics” (Bhabha 1994:233). The construction of one’s identity thus is a free choice but it is not absolutely free. Identity is still bound by some aspects and characters. He can switch where he locates himself. For Pi, he subverts his identity.

The concept of subverting cultural identity in *Life of Pi* gives an influence toward the concept of nation-state. If Nation-state cannot construct one’s cultural identity, so nation-state is nothing. Precisely, the concept of nation is the only unconscious construction. “The whole nation as well as the individual man works all unconsciously. When this is placed alongside his idea that the cultural life of the nation is 'unconsciously' lived” (Bhabha, 1994:12). In the same way Pi’s birth into Hinduism reflects his association with its rites and rituals. It is his “Original landscape ... defines who and why we are” (Anderson, 1995:50).

This original faith is not abandoned by Pi but becomes a constant element of his identity. His identification as a Hindu is clear and it is not bounded or fixed. He goes on to affirm his openness to diversity in recounting that “I was fourteen years old -and a contented Hindu -when I met Jesus Christ on a holiday” (Martel, 2002:50). He knows that religion that bond into its punishment is not better than colonialism. On the other side, this attitude can be read as the effort of mimicry; to imitate colonizer’s religion. It is because he knows that Hindu does not have any privilege like Christian. “A kind of creolization has already reconfigured these worlds, not least through Christian religion, and its association with being ‘educated’ and modern” (Venn, 2006:63). Since it is categorized as mimicry, he does not judge himself to be Christian but he uses Christian to show colonizer’s mistake. For Jesus Christ, he says “thanks to Lord Krishna for having put Jesus of Nazareth, whose humanity I found so compelling, in my way” (Martel, 2002:114). Jesus is the adorable figure for Western people but their attitude is contradictory to humanity spread by Jesus. Doing this provocative act, he constantly has changed his cultural identity. He is not truly India anymore since there is another religion that fulfills his cultural identity. His identity is presented as not fully determined. “The ambivalence of mimicry does not merely rupture the discourse but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a partial presence” (Bhabha, 1994:86). It is the critique for fundamentalist of India as nation that fills one’s identity into single criteria whether India is Hindu. It happens because of “nationalists who have sought authority in the authenticity of ‘origins’” (Bhabha, 1994:120). This destruction on nation-state gives huge impact to conceive the origin of culture, nationalism, and nation’s supremacy. If there is no nation that holds its cultural supremacy, to say Canada is the promising land for Pi is something disputable. Therefore, Martel intently uses Canada as Pi’s unachieved goal. Canada is Pi’s intended nation.

Canada has been considered in crisis of identity. It is a crisis which opens up a void that must be filled (Mackey, 1999:8). It is possible for Canada to consume and absorb the multiple national identities of those who fill this void. Therefore, multiculturalism and plurality become its mode of national identification. In the sea, Pi

once discovers an island that he actually does not know whether he has achieved Canada or not. This island appears to offer him protection from the dangers at sea. When Pi tests the land with his foot, it turns out to be solid. He believes he is saved. Unfortunately, this is not a real land. His acceptance of the illusion of nation as reality gives rise to an impression of cultural rootedness. It is like the trees on Martel’s island appear to be rooted on land. Pi still considers that there is nation. Here, his nationalism is questioned. Pi is reminded that he is not in India anymore. Homi Bhabha himself rejects the stable identity associated with the national form. He wants to keep this identity an open one. Here, nation is an illusion like this island.

The island is not actually land. It has no soil or substance, but in his need to survive, Pi suspends his disbelief and allows himself to accept it as real. Martel’s is metaphorically showing that the representation of nation can be seen to be one’s illusion. Tagor as citing by Gandhi also consider that nation with its nationalism is a system of illusions, designed progressively to homogenise and normalise small, individual sentiments of insurgency (Gandhi, 1998:121). However, at the same time, this illusion is remaining necessary for human survival. It is a psychological bond that joins people together and at the same time differs them from all others outside so that the struggle against colonizer can be conducted, “Nationalism has supplied the revolutionary vocabulary for various decolonisation struggles, and it has long been acknowledged as the political vector through which disparate anti-colonial movements acquire a cohesive revolutionary shape and form” (Gandhi, 1998:111).

Finally, in the end of the novel, Pi arrives in his last place Mexico. Arriving in Mexico also proves that Canada is not his promising land anymore. Here, “The position of authority is alienated” (Bhabha, 1994:97). This research proves that the character of Pi “is a subject of such affective ambivalence and discursive disturbance” (Bhabha, 1994:97) where his body is doubled to be East or West. Pi in this novel indeed demonstrates the ways where transnational identification moves beyond national boundaries that he places an ideal subject in post-colonialism.

5. Conclusion

This novel shows Martel understanding to view that there is no fixed identity. He tells about Piscine, the main character in this novel. Piscine is the one who lives "in-between". He does not choose whether he is East or West, Canada or India. Martel gives his readers an example this condition such as living in the castaway. Pi's condition in the sea is like a world in which the alternative model to the power the nation-state is the vulnerable individual. Pi is portrait of the transnational people who constantly seeks location within an imagined community.

His Canadian cultural background with its many cultures, races, and social backgrounds, gives him experiences that oblige him to abandon any static view of identity, and examine the dynamic process of identification. This attitude also destructs his political subjectivity to place one's identity in single place. Therefore, he does not write East inferior toward West, even he re-writes West that do not tend to be "the promising land". Martel's experiences living in Canada as diasporic country gives him many influences toward his paradigm to see identity. From this understanding, this research applies Bhabha's intention about the idea of identity. Identity is never identical with itself. The cultural identity is always being questioned from this process.

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